

Danger in the Baltic

Yesterday's *Pravda* editorial, taken together with the report that Mr Gorbachev personally dissociated himself at least from the "strident tone" of last week's attack on the Baltic nationalist movements by the Soviet party leadership, gives some grounds for hope that a head-on collision between Moscow and the Baltic republics may yet be avoided. But neither side can be unaware how great is now the danger of such a collision, nor yet how momentous will be its consequences if it occurs. Both must know that the fate of *perestroika* is at stake, and that the game is being played out in full view of a fascinated yet agonised world opinion.

As far as rights go, informed opinion in the West is surely agreed that the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian peoples are authentic nations, entitled by the terms of the UN Charter to determine their own future. Their independence was recognised in 1920 by Soviet Russia, and their subsequent incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940 was a military takeover, legitimised only by a grotesque parody of an act of self-determination. The Soviet constitution itself asserts their right to secede from the Union (in common with all the other Soviet republics).

Limit to tolerance

Rights, however, are not self-implementing. The world, unhappily, offers many examples of "nations" which in equity should enjoy the right of self-determination but are prevented, by *force majeure*, from asserting it in practice. The Baltic nations have the misfortune to have been annexed by a military superpower which, even if declining, is still easily strong enough to crush them, and whose ruling elite regards their lands as part of its national territory. The tolerance of that elite, under Mr Gorbachev's leadership, for free expression and free political activity has far surpassed all expectations; but it still seems very unlikely that that tolerance could extend to an actual disintegration of the Union or the loss of parts of its territory, however ill-gotten. At that point the crude argument of force seems certain to be invoked, and it is no good

imagining that any external force, from the West or elsewhere, would be brought in to redress the balance. However much the West might admire and sympathise with the Baltic peoples, it would not embark on World War Three to secure their freedom, and it would be no kindness to encourage them in any illusions on that point.

No illusion

Equally, however, the Soviet leadership should be under no illusion that the use of force to crush the nationalist movements in the Baltic (or for that matter in Moldavia, an analogous case except that linguistically and historically it is part of Romania rather than a separate nation) could be brushed aside as an "internal affair" without consequences for international relations. Any kind of military crackdown in those republics, with tanks in the streets and/or the sudden arrest or disappearance of nationalist leaders, suppression of newspapers etc, would wipe out at a stroke all the remarkable gains made since Mr Gorbachev came to power in winning the confidence and goodwill of the rest of the world.

Such methods, once adopted, could certainly not be confined to the Baltic: they would inevitably spill over into the handling of dissent in other parts of the Soviet Union. They would also render even more problematic, if not impossible, the peaceful management of the momentous changes now under way in Poland and elsewhere in east-central Europe. The Soviet Union would again be perceived throughout the world as a harsh and dictatorial power. Inevitably, as in China, its leaders would react to the world condemnation with outbursts of xenophobia. Mr Gorbachev personally might or might not remain in office, but what he now stands for would be irrevocably destroyed. The present climate of detente would come to an abrupt end, and the Cold War would return.

No one either in the Baltic states or in Moscow should wish to incur even part of the responsibility for such developments, in the eyes of the world, of history, or above all of their own people.

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